



# Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board



## Minute

Thursday, 28 November 2024, 15:00.

Microsoft Teams.

### Present:

#### Orkney Islands Council:

Dr Stephen Clackson, Lindsay Hall, James Moar, John Ross Scott and Dr Jean Stevenson.

#### Shetland Islands Council:

Allison Duncan, Stephen Leask, Liz Peterson, Gary Robinson and Arwed Wenger.

### Clerk to the Board:

- Karen A Greaves.

### In Attendance:

- Robert Eunson, Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer.
- Erik Knight, Treasurer to the Board.

#### Orkney Islands Council:

- Andrew Groundwater, Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development.
- Gavin Mitchell, Head of Legal and Governance.
- Hazel Flett, Service Manager (Governance).
- Andrew Paterson, Chief Internal Auditor.

### Chair:

- Stephen Leask, Shetland Islands Council, Convener of the Board.

## 1. Introduction and Apologies

The Convener welcomed everyone and reminded members that the meeting was being recorded and broadcast live over the Internet on Orkney Islands Council's website. The recording would also be publicly available following the meeting and available for listening to for 12 months thereafter.

Apologies for absence had been intimated on behalf of Kristopher Leask, Orkney Islands Council. James Moar was attending as a substitute.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest had been intimated.

## **3. Minute of Previous Meeting**

There had been previously circulated the draft Minute of the Meeting of the Board held on 26 September 2024.

On the motion of John Ross Scott, seconded by Gary Robinson, the Board **approved** the Minute of the Meeting of the Board held on 26 September 2024, as a true record.

## **4. Matters Arising Log**

There had been previously circulated a log detailing matters arising from previous meetings, together with a list of regular reports.

The Clerk to the Board outlined the outstanding actions, two of which related to reporting the work of the Board to the constituent authorities, with the third action relating to a Whistleblowing Policy. It had been previously agreed that a briefing be issued after the annual performance report was considered by the Board in June, and a draft Whistleblowing Policy was an item on the agenda for consideration later in the meeting. All regular reports which required to be considered at this meeting were also the subject of separate reports.

The Board scrutinised the log and took assurance that action had been taken where required.

## **5. Revenue Expenditure Monitoring**

There had been previously circulated a report by the Treasurer to the Board advising on the revenue budget outturn position as at 30 September 2024, in respect of the Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board.

The Treasurer to the Board advised that a budget surplus of £30,700 had accrued as at 30 September 2024 and there were no material variances reported.

In response to a query from John Ross Scott regarding Joint Costs, Shetland Costs and Orkney Costs, the Treasurer to the Board confirmed that the Shetland and Orkney Costs comprised specific costs relating to the two offices, namely property costs, while Joint Costs, which were mainly staffing costs, were non-location specific and were split equally between the two constituent authorities.

The Board noted the revenue financial summary statement, in respect of the Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board, for the period 1 April to 30 September 2024, attached as Annex 1 to the report by the Treasurer to the Board, indicating a budget surplus position of £30,700.

## **6. Internal Audit Actions – Progress Report**

There had been previously circulated a report by the Chief Internal Auditor presenting the six-monthly progress update on Internal Audit actions for scrutiny.

The Chief Internal Auditor advised that, since his appointment, five audits had been completed, resulting in 19 recommendations. Nine of the recommendations had been completed prior to this report being presented to the Board. An update on progress with the remaining 10 recommendations was outlined in the appendix to the report circulated. Of the 10 outstanding recommendations, seven were complete, two were ongoing and one was past the agreed target date.

In response to a query from John Ross Scott regarding the one medium priority recommendation and whether this was a significant issue, the Chief Internal Auditor confirmed that the action related to segregation of duties and, given the small staffing cohort, this was flagged as a medium priority rather than low.

The Board noted:

**6.1.** That, in order to comply with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards, the Chief Internal Auditor must establish a follow-up process to monitor and ensure that management actions had been effectively implemented or that senior management had accepted the risk of not taking action.

The Board scrutinised:

**6.2.** The progress made, to date, in completing the Internal Audit actions, as detailed in Appendix 1 to the report by the Chief Internal Auditor, and obtained assurance that issues found during internal audits were being actioned and followed up.

## **7. Whistleblowing Policy**

There had been previously circulated a report by the Clerk to the Board presenting a draft Whistleblowing Policy for the Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board, together with an Equality Impact Assessment, for consideration.

The Clerk to the Board advised that, previously a Board member had queried whether staff had access to a Whistleblowing Policy. Given that the staff were employed on Shetland Islands Council's terms and conditions, that Council's Whistleblowing Policy had been looked at. However, it was determined that a policy tailored specifically for the Board would be preferable, so that Board staff were clear on who they should contact. A draft policy had therefore been developed, which aimed to:

- Provide ways for employees/workers to raise concerns and receive feedback.
- Inform employees/workers on how to take the matter further if they were dissatisfied with the response.
- Reassure employees/workers that they would be protected from detrimental treatment for "whistleblowing" in good faith and in the public interest.

In response to a query from Lindsay Hall on where a member of staff could go should they not be satisfied that their issue had been dealt with appropriately, the Clerk confirmed that section 9 of the policy signposted other organisations.

In response to a query from Gary Robinson on who would undertake the role of the confidential contact, the Clerk confirmed it would depend on the circumstance, however options were the Chief Internal Auditor, the Clerk or the Assessor. A judgement would be made by the Chief Internal Auditor as to how the matter would be progressed.

In response to a query from the Convener regarding filtering vexatious claims, the Clerk confirmed that any claim required to be investigated to ascertain the facts. The Chief Internal Auditor outlined the usual process whereby an initial investigation would be undertaken to determine whether the claim was or could be substantiated. Following that, it would then be determined whether the claim was vexatious or whether to proceed to a full investigation.

The Board **resolved** that the Whistleblowing Policy for the Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board, attached as Appendix 1 to the report by the Clerk to the Board, be approved.

## 8. Risk Register

There had been previously circulated a report by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer presenting the annual update to the Risk Register to enable the Board to take assurance that operations in relation to the Board's functions operated effectively under all assessable and identifiable risks.

The Assessor confirmed that the changes were minor, with the only material change being around potential resolution dates for the currently vacant post of Depute Assessor at section 4.9 and under the Issues Register at the end of the Risk Register.

In response to queries from Allison Duncan and James Moar regarding the Shetland office accommodation and whether it remained fit for purpose, including accessibility, the Assessor confirmed that, just now, the office accommodation did serve its purpose, although that may come under greater scrutiny once the Depute Assessor was in post. The Convener suggested that, when the Assessor was next in Shetland, himself, together with Allison Duncan should visit the Shetland office accommodation and report back to the next meeting.

Lindsay Hall commented on the number of red risks which he considered tenuous and unlikely to happen. One example was travel disruption – this was not a risk but a reality which should be mitigated against. Another example was late delivery of paperwork, and referred to the recent election event where postal voting packs had been delivered extremely late and, in some cases, meant that votes were not counted.

The Assessor advised that completion of statutory duties could depend on travel, therefore mitigation was appropriate. The Clerk confirmed that the matter of postal voting packs was for the Election Office/Returning Officer (and not the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer) and concerns regarding the recent election event would be addressed by the Electoral Commission.

The Clerk further commented on the format of the risk register, which was different to that of Orkney Islands Council, in that both inherent and residual ratings were incorporated. Although many of the inherent ratings were red, once mitigation and/or current controls were factored in, the residual ratings changed to amber or green, resulting in no risks with a residual rating of red.

In response to a query from Gary Robinson regarding risks 3.2 and 3.3, namely malicious damage to systems and attempted breach of security, both potentially caused by hacking or viruses, the Assessor confirmed that he relied heavily on the IT services of both constituent authorities and undertook to raise this with both IT services. The Convener asked that this be followed up.

In response to various queries regarding staffing, the Assessor advised that, with a small head count split between two offices and then further split into 3 distinct areas, this often resulted in single person “teams”. However, the graduate programme for valuers was certainly now showing benefits, although consideration would require to be given to the electoral administration side.

The Board scrutinised the updated Risk Register and took assurance.

## **9. Best Value**

There had been previously circulated a report by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer presenting the six-monthly progress update, as required by the Board's Best Value regime, for the reporting period April to October 2024.

The Assessor highlighted the following:

- The UK Parliamentary Election which took place on 4 July 2024 – given the short notice and new legislative requirements, this was an intense period for the staff.
- As a result, the annual canvass had started later than planned, although they were still on schedule to publish by 1 December.
- Two appeals against Completion Notices issued for new dwellings had been successfully defended at the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland.
- Due to staff turnover, both teams had been completely replaced, however the new recruits were settling in well.
- The Rateable Value of entries in the Shetland Valuation Roll was under reported by £9.5 million, as the Viking Wind Farm had since been included.
- Outstanding appeals arising through the Coronavirus pandemic and as part of the running roll, had reduced from around 90 to seven, mostly as a result of appeals being withdrawn.
- The self-catering audit continued to be time consuming, particularly in Orkney, and would coincide with the Revaluation in 2025.
- Regarding the 2023 Revaluation, 200 proposals required to be cleared by September 2025.
- There was a current live recruitment for a Valuer, with one recent appointment and some of the trainee valuers going for chartered status in early 2025.

In response to a query from Dr Jean Stevenson regarding the significant differential in Rateable Values (RV) between Orkney and Shetland, the Assessor confirmed that Shetland included Sullom Voe, the gas terminal and Viking Energy (total RV of £36 million), whereas Orkney's largest contributor was the Flotta Oil Terminal at £7 million.

The Convener thanked the Assessor for the report which indicated the amount of good work being carried out.

The Board scrutinised the Best Value report and took assurance.

## **10. Date of Next Meeting**

The Clerk advised that the next meeting was scheduled to be held on 27 March 2025 and would be a virtual meeting.

The Board had previously agreed the following dates for 2025:

- 24 June 2025 (in Shetland).
- 30 September 2025 (in Orkney).
- 27 November 2025 (virtual).

## **11. Conclusion of Meeting**

There being no further business, the Convener declared the meeting concluded at 15:50.

Signed: (Convener).